

# Words and deeds: the power and weakness of Cicero's oratory

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*Cicero is often depicted, partly on the basis of his own works, as a man of words rather than a man of action, but this is to underestimate the complex role which persuasive oratory played in Ancient Rome.*

History has not been kind to Cicero. He is by far the best-preserved Latin author, and we know more about him than any other figure from the ancient world. But in creating a record of his achievements that has lasted over two millennia, Cicero gave historians the weapons to attack him: they contrast Cicero with the other leading men of his age, in particular Julius Caesar.

## In Caesar's shadow

### Cicero the orator v. Caesar the general

Caesar was Rome's most energetic general, a man of action, who awed his contemporaries by a combination of military skill, personal charisma, and great aristocratic prestige. His effect upon historians has been similar: admiration for his achievements. He was a dynamic intellectual as well as a tactical genius, writing books on how Latin worked, and reforming the calendar so that the religious festivals actually fitted with the times of year in which they were supposed to occur. Cicero is a different character. He was not a military commander, but a man who made his living in the law-courts: he became a powerful figure in Roman political life entirely on the basis of his ability to persuade an audience.

Unlike Caesar, his family was not aristocratic, and none of his ancestors had succeeded in the elitist world of Roman politics. His father, however, was ambitious for his sons. Cicero and his brother Quintus were sent to Rome from their home in Arpinum (around 60 miles to the east) to associate with leading statesmen and intellectuals, and then to Greece, where Cicero studied philosophy and rhetoric: the art of public speaking.

## All talk? Cicero, the Roman Demosthenes

Rome was rising on the world stage. The political high-point of Greece, however, had passed, and students and teachers in Athens spent much effort studying the writings of the great orators of the past. The greatest of these was Demosthenes, who, in the fourth century B.C., had tried to preserve the political independence of Greece from the growing power of Macedon, the kingdom to the north which soon produced Alexander the Great, and a new world empire that changed Greece's cultural identity irreversibly.

Cicero adopted Demosthenes' powerful rhetorical style for himself, and was the first Roman to find a way of translating the rolling, climactic sentences of Demosthenes' Greek into a Latin equivalent. He also aspired to achieve the same kind of political power, the same pivotal role as an orator at the centre of the political system, as Demosthenes had done. And this is where the root of the historical problem of Cicero lies. Cicero made his political career on the basis of his oratory, rather than as a man

of action. The product of that career was not a tangible difference to the lives of ordinary Romans: not the calendar reinstated, or new territories brought under Roman rule, but rather a set of books: shelves and shelves of speeches, philosophy, rhetorical theory, poetry, and letters. These were the products of Cicero's labours, and it is a fascinating question whether these books, or Caesar's conquests, have been of greater significance to later ages.

By publishing the speeches that he delivered in a wide range of court cases, or at moments of political crisis in the senate, Cicero provides a microscopic insight into these events; likewise, in his letters, he reveals details about how Roman politics worked, how political relationships were negotiated, and about the concerns of his contemporaries, which have no parallel in any other source. Less obviously he provides a vision of Roman culture that has been enormously influential in preserving Roman values: most of our clichés about Romans being stern, high-minded, obsessed with tradition, and devoted to Rome itself are expressed most imaginatively by Cicero. In all these areas, historians examine the past in the same way that astronomers scan the skies: where we have Cicero's evidence, we are given access to a much more powerful telescope.

## Marcus (Tullius Cicero) in the middle

The problem is that Cicero himself wields the telescope, and also appears at the centre of the picture. He wanted to show that he was indeed the Roman Demosthenes, and that the power of effective rhetoric in politics was at least as important as military skill, influential friends, or aristocratic ancestors. Cicero's first ancient biographer, the Greek author Plutarch, records Cicero's obsession with his own reputation. The unkindness of history has been to dwell upon this self-justification, and upon the manner in which Cicero makes his own values appear typical of all Romans. Faced with Cicero's writings as historical evidence, the obvious reaction is to try to move Cicero out of the centre of the picture: to sift the evidence to get rid of his personal perspective and to look beyond his bias to the facts behind particular events.

The result of such sifting is that Cicero emerges as a long-winded rhetorician, a man who talked too much, and who laid too much emphasis upon his own skill with language. His speeches then become one demonstration after another of his ability to twist an argument to the advantage of his client. Admittedly, he does this with great skill. In the *Pro Caelio* for example, the defence speech for Marcus Caelius Rufus, Cicero deflects the attention of the court away from the defendant, who, even on the basis of the evidence discussed in the speech, was probably guilty. He dwells on the evil influence of a powerful and unconventional woman: Clodia, at one point the lover of Caelius, and also of the poet Catullus, who immortalized her as his mistress Lesbia. If we believe Cicero, there were also rumours of an incestuous relationship with her brother, another wild character, the popular politician Clodius Pulcher. With

these loose-living characters at his disposal, and the aristocratic ancestors of the Clodii to draw upon for effect, Cicero convinced the court that Caelius was just a young man led astray by a wicked woman: his crimes, or let us call them errors, were in fact typical of a traditional Roman adolescence. To declare him innocent is to reassure oneself that boys will be boys, and that family values are being respected, in the face of a much greater threat from a powerful and independent woman.

### **The evils of speaking well**

Such rhetorical skill is impressive, and we can learn a lot about how we ourselves respond to the rhetoric of our own politicians. But if we look more widely in Cicero's writings, we find that he was aware of the problematic place of rhetoric in Rome's culture. Towards the end of his life Cicero looked back over his career, and placed it within a history of Roman oratory. The dialogue *Brutus*, named after the man who was soon to assassinate Caesar, examines the central problem of Cicero's own career: the essential difficulty of being an orator at Rome.

With hindsight, Cicero does not flinch from the obvious conclusion: to have a successful political career on the basis of rhetorical skill is rare. The great men of Roman history cannot be thought of as orators. Often they were poor speakers, whose talents lay with decision-making and personal charisma rather than with any ability with words. Cicero emerges, in this work, as a man revealing the shaky basis for his own position at Rome. Within a couple of years, Mark Antony declared Cicero his enemy, had him murdered, and displayed his head, tongue, and right hand at Rome: the tools with which Cicero had composed his most Demosthenic works, the *Philippics*. These were speeches directed against Antony, the title borrowed directly from Demosthenes. Antony's retaliation demonstrated that the sword was indeed mightier than the pen.

The paradox is that anyone looking back at Rome sees Antony as a brutal villain, and Cicero as the defender of free speech. The point of all Cicero's writings on rhetoric was to allow people to learn to participate effectively in public life. Works like *Brutus* invite readers to consider the role of rhetoric in politics. If he uses himself as an example of the orator who did manage to succeed, he also left his written legacy so that later readers could evaluate this problem for themselves. This is the main relevance of Cicero today. He invites us to reflect upon how writing and politics fit together, and how education can contribute to an effective society. If we look at today's political values, and in particular at debates about education and citizenship, we can see that these same issues are still important. Cicero's writings allow us to examine the role of careful argument, and of an individual's own style, in the life of the effective citizen, even in a society so different from his own.

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